

HEBREWS

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1. Hebrews 1:1-4

Introducing Hebrews

Jesus: Superior to the prophets

2. Hebrews 1:5-2:18

Jesus: Superior to the angels

3. Hebrews 3:1-19

Jesus: Superior to Moses

4. Hebrews 4:1-13

Jesus: Superior to Joshua

5. Hebrews 4:14-5:14

Jesus: Superior to Aaron

6. Hebrews 6:1-20

Jesus: A superior promise

7. Hebrews 7:1-28

Jesus: A superior priesthood

8. Hebrews 8:1-13

Jesus: A superior covenant

9. Hebrews 9:1-28

Jesus: A superior ministry

10. Hebrews 10:1-39

Jesus: A superior sacrifice

11. Hebrews 11:1-40

Faith exemplified

12. Hebrews 12:1-29

Faith tested

13. Hebrews 13:1-25

Faith working

Programme of study

Hebrews is one of the more difficult books in the New Testament. It is also one of the longer letters. It is tempting to pick out the parts of such books that we like or to ignore them altogether. However, in so doing, we can miss important dimensions of Christian teaching and, therefore, not be as faithful in our Christian living as we could be.

There are three important questions to ask of each Bible passage: What does the Bible say (observation)? What does the Bible mean (interpretation)? What does the Bible mean to me (application)?

The aim of this series of studies is to help you to become much more familiar with the answer to the first question (observation) – what does the Bible say? It also begins to explore the second question (interpretation), asking what the Bible passage means? This present study does not take much time considering the question, ‘what does the Bible mean to me?’ This is not because the application of the message of the Bible is unimportant but because it is our personal responsibility to apply the message to our own lives.

It is always tempting to take a shortcut. If we are on a walk we know that it is possible either to take a shortcut and arrive at the destination more quickly or to take a shortcut and end up hopelessly lost. The same is true in our study of the Bible. It is possible to jump right to the application stage without clearly establishing what the Bible means in its original context and to interpret that meaning for today. Sometimes we can arrive at the right conclusion – but what about the other times? This is an encouragement not to take dangerous shortcuts but to work through the message of the Bible carefully, to observe what it says, interpret what it means and apply what it teaches in daily living.

We live in an age of instant meals (frozen food, pre-packed ready meals). Busy people are easily tempted to buy shepherd’s pie, or beef lasagne or whatever their preference might be, in a cardboard box. Nevertheless, we know that nothing beats home cooking from the fresh, raw, unprocessed ingredients. Bible study can become like that. We can look at the comments in our daily Bible reading notes, listen to others speak about the Bible, in person, on the television or radio or in books – it can easily become the spiritual equivalent of the ready meal – but nothing really surpasses wrestling with the text ourselves.

The teaching style of the present study attempts to do some of the preparation of the raw ingredients for you, giving some insight as to how that preparation is done, with encouragement to go onto application so that the work is complete. These notes are not written as an academic treatise. The primary source is the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* which is quoted quite freely without detailed referencing.

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STUDY 1: Introducing Hebrews; Jesus: Superior to the prophets (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Introducing Hebrews

Hebrews is a book in which ordinary believers try to deal with the traditions of the past (the Old Testament) and respond to fresh movements of God in a rapidly changing world. Although Hebrews is traditionally called ‘a letter’, it is not a letter in the conventional sense. It does not begin with any details about the writer.

Who wrote Hebrews?

The ancient church was uncertain as to the answer to this question. It is not an anonymous letter for the original recipients knew the writer. It is unlikely that Paul wrote it. The four leading candidates for authorship are Barnabas, Silas, Luke and Apollos. The use of a masculine participle for the author (Hebrews 11:32) seems to rule out a woman author such as Priscilla. From the letter it is clear that the writer of Hebrews is an accomplished theologian. Barnabas, who wavered theologically at Antioch (Galatians 2:13) and from what we know of him does not seem to be a spokesman or teacher (Acts 14:12), is not a strong candidate. We know little about Silas, so have no particular evidence to suggest that he was the writer. Luke was also more of a pastor-historian than a theologian. Apollos is the most likely of the four to be the author (a choice favoured by Luther as well as some more recent scholars). He was ‘mighty in the Scriptures’ (Acts 18:24) and, as a Jew from Alexandria, was likely to be well-versed in the Septuagint (the Greek Translation of the Old Testament, sometimes abbreviated LXX), which the book of Hebrews quotes. Even so, it is worth noting that even the church at Alexandria never credits Apollos with writing Hebrews.

To whom was the letter written?

The traditional title ‘to the Hebrews’ is not part of the Greek text. Nevertheless, the constant comparison between Judaism and Christianity in the letter suggests that the first readers were Jewish Christians. Despite the interest in the office of the high priest and the temple, it is unlikely that the recipients lived in Jerusalem or Palestine as the writer states that they have not resisted to the point of shedding blood (Hebrews 12:4). There are some similarities with Paul’s letter to the Colossians and the Ephesians, suggesting that the letter may have originally been written to a group of Jewish Christians in the Lycus valley.

When was the letter written?

It is clear that the readers were largely second generation Christians for their first leaders had already died (Hebrews 13:7). They had been believers for some time (Hebrews 5:12) and had shown evidence of a strong faith (Hebrews 10:32-34), though some had given up meeting with other believers (Hebrews 10:25). The letter makes no reference to the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem (A.D. 70) so a date in the late 60s is probable.

Why was the letter written?

The letter is a curious blend of theological exploration and fervent exhortation. The main issue is the supremacy of Jesus and consequently how the believer should live. It is possible that, realising the growing tension between the Jews and Rome, some Christian believers wavered as to the identity of Jesus. The delay in his returning caused some to wonder if he were simply an angel or even an impostor. The common theme of the New Testament emerges in Hebrews – who is Jesus? Is he the believer’s great high priest, the Son of God? The writer urges the believers on, exhorting them to call upon Jesus, their great high priest. As far as the writer to the Hebrews is concerned, Jesus alone occupies the place of ultimate authority in the universe and believers must constantly turn to him.

Hebrews 1:1-4: Jesus: Superior to the prophets

Hebrews starts like a sermon and ends like a letter. There are no opening greetings, no indication of the writer's name and no expression of good wishes. Instead, the letter opens with a long and exciting sentence about the Son. In the original Greek the four opening verses are one sentence. This single magnificent sentence shows the greatness of Jesus and his saving work and sets the scene for the seven following chapters that all stress the supremacy of the Son. The Son is superior to the prophets (Hebrews 1:1-4), to the angels (Hebrews 1:5-2:18), to Moses (Hebrews 3:1-4:7), to Joshua (Hebrews 4:8-13) and to Aaron (Hebrews 4:14-7:28). The Son, with the Father and the Spirit, is worthy of worship – the letter to the Hebrews will unfold many reasons why the Son is worthy of our praise.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways

The subject of the sentence is God. It is God who is speaking. In the past ('of old'), he spoke to their forefathers, the people of Israel, through many prophets; Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2 ff.), to Elijah in the still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12 ff.), to Isaiah in a vision in the temple (Isaiah 6:1 ff.), to Hosea in his family circumstances (Hosea 1:2), and to Amos in a basket of summer fruit (Amos 8:1). We need not limit the list of prophets to those who wrote canonical books but can include men of God like Abraham to whom God's word was given. God spoke in various ways; through visions and dreams, through angels, through the Urim and Thummim, through symbols, natural events, a pillar of smoke and other means. The writer to the Hebrews quotes the Old Testament often enough to show that he had not written them off. God still speaks through the Old Testament prophets.

but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son

The phrase 'in these last days' frequently refers to the days of the Messiah. 'These last days' means more than merely in the present time. It marks the beginning of the 'last days' which will continue until the Lord comes again. In Jesus, the new age, the Messianic age has appeared. The same God who spoke through the prophets has now spoken in a unique and personal way, by his Son, who speaks with greater authority and completeness than the prophets (Matthew 13:16-17). The fullness of what God wanted to say is found in the Son. The writer now spells out a series of propositions about the Son.

whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe

To be 'appointed heir' is rather unusual. Normally the heir comes into possession through the death of the one who made the will. With God, his Son is appointed heir of all things, to show that he has supreme place in the universe (Psalm 2:8). The New Testament is clear that God created through his Son (cf. John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16).

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being

In Jesus the glory of God is revealed (Colossians 1:15). 'Glory' often refers to the light of God's presence, while 'radiance' means 'splendour' or 'intense brightness', light that streams forth from the source of light. In Jesus the person and the presence of God are revealed (e.g., Luke 9:32; John 1:14, 2:11, 17:5; Romans 8:17; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:14). Just as it is impossible to separate the sun's light from the sun itself, so no one can separate the nature of Son from that of his Father. In Jesus we see the essence of God. 'Exact representation' translates one Greek word which is often used to denote the impress of a die, that is 'Jesus bears the very stamp of the nature of God'. Just as the face of a child exhibits a family relationship, so the nature and person of God is known in the face of

Jesus Christ. The 'being' of the Father is his essential nature (e.g., John 1:2, Philippians 2:6; Colossians 1:15). The Son provides an accurate picture of the person of the Father (John 14:9).

sustaining all things by his powerful word

Sustaining has the sense of 'carrying along'. Nothing is excluded from the scope of the Son's sustaining activity. 'Powerful' here is 'dynamite-power', that is literal, physical power. No more powerful expression of the deity of the son is possible. He is not the pinnacle of creation, he is the one through whom the universe was created and by whom the universe is sustained.

After he had provided purification for sins

The readers of the letter to the Hebrews would have been familiar with the Old Testament 'Day of Atonement' (*yom kippur*) and the blood of the covenant. In contrast to his power in sustaining the universe, the writer now refers to Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. No prophet could have accomplished this. The Son's mission was to deal with the problem of sin. The essence of a priest's work is the offering of sacrifice. 'Purification' means cleansing and removal of sin. The stains of sin are completely cleansed by the work of Jesus. The work had been accomplished at the cross.

he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven

Sitting is the posture of rest. The normal posture of a priest is standing (Hebrews 10:11) indicating that the work of Jesus is complete. Sitting at the right hand of God is meant symbolically rather than literally for God has no right hand. Nevertheless, the right hand position is the place of highest honour (Luke 22:69). 'Majesty in heaven' is just a respectful way of speaking about God himself (Psalm 110:1), 'heaven' meaning more literally 'in the heights'.

So he became as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs

The authority that the Son has been given is superior to the angels. 'Name' means status, rank or reputation. The meaning of the superior name is that the Son is exalted above all the others in the universe (Ephesians 1:21 and Philippians 2:9). Whatever work the angels might do, it is nothing compared with the saving work of the Son. With regard to the Son, his 'status', his 'rank', his 'reputation', his 'name' is above every other name.

STUDY 2: Hebrews 1:5-2:18: Jesus: Superior to the angels

In the opening four verses, the writer to the Hebrews has spelled shown that the Son is superior to the prophets. Now he continues by showing that the Son is superior to angels. There is a possibility that some members of the New Testament church were giving undue honour to angels – a temptation not unknown among some Christians today. More likely, however, is the author's continues desire to expound the superiority of the Son, which he does through presenting a succession of scriptural texts.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?

The straightforward answer is that there is no angel to whom God has said this. It is merely a rhetorical question. The Eternal Son was 'Son' prior to creation, let alone prior to the incarnation and his nativity at Bethlehem. Although the Son entered into creation as a man his deity assures that he is far above creation, and is superior to angels. Angels are sometimes called 'sons of God' (Job 1:6, 2:1), as is Israel (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1) and Solomon (2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 28:6). Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son (Psalm 2:7) is given a unique status. The words originally used to describe Solomon are also applied to the Messiah. The father-son relationship between God the Father and the Christ is fundamental. That does, however, leave us with the problem of what the word 'today' means. The early church understood these passages to refer to Jesus' induction into his royal position as King of the universe at his resurrection and exaltation. God's becoming the Son's Father, then, refers to God's open expression of their relationship upon Christ's enthronement a formal and public celebration of what had been true from the beginning.

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

The quotation is from Deuteronomy 32:43 in the Septuagint (LXX). The obvious understanding is the worship of the angelic host at Bethlehem (Luke 2:8-14).

In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire."

The quotation is from Psalm 104:4. Although angels are superior to men, the Son is superior to the angels. Angels can be reduced to the temporal and elemental forces of wind and fire but the Son is eternal.

But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

The quotation is from Psalm 45:6-7, in which the Son is addressed as 'God'. The royalty of the Son is shown by references to his throne, sceptre and kingdom. His rule is righteous and eternal. His love for righteousness is balanced by his hating wickedness (lit. 'lawlessness'). Anointing was regularly used as a rite of consecration to a sacred function including kingship (Exodus 28:41; 1 Samuel 10:1; 1 Kings 19:16). Such a verse is important for our Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. The doctrine which was worked out at the council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) was later summarised by Augustine: 'We believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, maker and ruler of every creature, and that "Father" is not "Son," nor "Holy Spirit" "Father" or "Son"; but a Trinity of mutually related persons, and a unity of equal essence.'

He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

The words of Psalm 102:25-27 are applied to God. Here, however, they apply to Christ, the eternal Son. The Son was God's agent in creation, the one who laid the earth's foundations and constructed heaven. All these will in due course perish (the created things like old garments will wear out), but their maker is eternal.

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?

The reference here is to Psalm 110:1. Whereas angels stand before God (Luke 1:19; Revelation 8:2; cf. Daniel 7:10), the Son sits. God himself (the Father) also serves the Son. How great then is he whom God deigns to serve! Arius, a fourth-century heretic, insisted that the Son had a point of beginning, saying of him: "And before he was begotten or created or appointed or established, he did not exist; for he was not unbegotten. The council of Nicea, which met in A.D. 325, answered Arianism by interpreting the "begetting" to mean that he was "of the same essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [homoousios] with the Father.

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

The contrast could not be more vivid. Even God serves the Son but the angels are the servants of those who are being saved by the Son. 'Inherit' need not mean receiving something by a will but simply 'gain possession' (Matthew 5:5, 1Corinthians 6:9-10, Mark 10:17, Hebrews 6:12, 1 Corinthians 15:50, Hebrews 1:4, Hebrews 12:17).

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

The work of the Son as Saviour proves that he is greater than any angel. His message is superior so that 'we must pay more careful attention' to it. The writer describes this message as 'what we have heard' suggesting that he was not one of the original disciples. The danger of drifting is subtle. We do not need to be violently opposed to the message to drift away, just careless. The way to avoid drifting is to be well anchored in the truth of the message.

For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

If the 'message' or 'word' (Gk *logos*) of the law came through angels and that was binding and disobedience was punished then paying careful attention to the word that came through the Son is even more important. Although it is not popular today, we do well to remember that Jesus himself emphasised the reality of judgment. The things of God are a serious business. Jesus announced the gospel of the Kingdom of God, that is, where God's kingly rule holds sway. Salvation is not 'cheap grace' but costly – it is the cost of the cross. God himself has testified to the great salvation that is secured by the Son. 'Signs' are not simply displays of power but have a purpose – they point to the great salvation in the Son. 'Wonders' emphasise the marvellous nature of the signs. Various (lit. 'many coloured', as in variegated) miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit have the purpose of pointing to the Son.

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

'Not to angels' shows that subjection of the world to come was made to someone other than the angels. It seems unlikely that the writer to the Hebrews did not know the source of his quotation (Psalm 8:4-6) but he does not want the reader to be diverted. His purpose is to show that the Old Testament bears witness to Christ. 'Man' is really a generic name for the whole of humanity. 'Son of man' here is simply a device of Hebrew poetry meaning a further generation of humanity, rather than being a title in the Messianic sense, often used by Jesus. The Psalmist suggests that God is 'mindful' of humanity and does 'care' and yet he wonders why there is in 'man' that God should do so.

You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honour and put everything under his feet." In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.

The critical question is to whom does 'him' refer? It is a common misunderstanding that this verse refers to the Son, Jesus Christ (because of the earlier reference to Son of man). Yet, humankind ('man') would seem to be the correct answer. Angels are created, heavenly beings, who act as messengers for God. The angels worship the Son, showing that the Son is divine. In the beginning, God created man (Adam) a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour, giving him authority over the world that God had created. Through doubt and disobedience man fell from this place of glory and honour and order turned to chaos, so that at present we do not see everything subject to him.

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Jesus shared fully in our humanity. He has gone through the experience of living out this earthly life (as a second Adam) and he is now "crowned with glory and honour" because of his faith and obedience. The writer calls the Saviour by his human name, Jesus. We do not see the psalm fulfilled in mankind at large but we do see it fulfilled in the man Jesus, because of his saving work, 'because he suffered death'. By the grace of God, Jesus tasted death (came to know it) and through his dying his saving work was accomplished.

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Just as Adam was the first man, who had sons of whom God was mindful. Jesus is the second man, and it is these sons that are being brought to glory (a place of honour and splendour). God's plan of salvation is consistent with his character. The sufferings of Jesus did not take place by chance. 'Author' of salvation (leader, ruler, originator, founder) could also be translated 'pioneer', 'saviour' or 'champion'. Jesus is the 'proper man'. 'Perfect through suffering' is a phrase that can easily be misunderstood. The sufferings of Jesus do not perfect that which is imperfect. Perfection in Hebrews has to do with completing the course. The Son was 'morally perfect' in heaven but he was not the perfect Saviour. It is only by his suffering and death that Jesus became the perfect (i.e. complete) Saviour, for it was only through that act of saving grace that he could bring many sons to glory.

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

It is only by Jesus that we can be made holy. Jesus is uniquely qualified to be Priest and Saviour to sinful humanity because, on the one hand, he shares fully in our humanity and yet, on the other hand, is without sin. There is a special sense in which Jesus is brother to all those who are given the right to call God, 'Father'. It is to those who are being made holy that such a privilege is given.

He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."

The quotation is from Psalm 22. In the ancient world, a 'name' was more than a convenient label; it stood for the whole person. 'Congregation' or 'assembly' (Gk *ekklesia*) became the characteristic word for the gatherings of Christians, which we sometimes translate 'church'. In the congregation of 'brothers', Jesus declares the name of the Father and sings God's praises.

And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."

This quotation is from Isaiah 8:17-18. Many of the scriptures that speak of the coming of the Messiah are found in Isaiah. Isaiah recognises that the Saviour will come to his people (see Isaiah 9).

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

It was by his death that Jesus destroyed the evil one. Jesus did not merely appear to be a man, but was truly human. Since the children he came to save have flesh and blood, he shared the very essence of humanity (flesh and blood). By Adam's sin, brought about by the temptation of the devil, death entered the world (Genesis 2:17; 3:19; Rom 5:12). From this we may assume that the devil exercises his power in the realm of death. Jesus has divested death of its power and destroyed the evil one by his death and resurrection, setting free all those who were captive to the power of death. The Christian message announces freedom from the fear of death (Revelation 1:18) because there is hope of life eternal.

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

The Son's work involved a genuine incarnation. The Son was born at Bethlehem and given the name Jesus (for he will save his people from their sins). Jesus came to be Saviour not to angels but to the descendants (a better translation is 'seed') of Abraham. It is not by human ancestry that descent from Abraham must be traced but by faith. Fully human, Jesus can be 'high priest' to his people. The service he renders is to 'make atonement for the sins of his people'. 'Make atonement' is literally 'propitiate' (that is to cause God's wrath to be put away). When people fall into sin they arouse the wrath of God (Romans 1:18) and become enemies of God (Romans 5:10). The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus bears the wrath of God through his death upon the cross.

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Jesus can help the tempted because he understands what temptation is. He is not simply willing to help – he is able to help. Jesus' work as Saviour is in no way incomplete. He was not only willing to suffer but he actually suffered and died for us.

Study 3: Hebrews 3:1-19: Jesus: Superior to Moses

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

‘Therefore’ is a word that is easy to skip over but links this section to the preceding chapters, particularly to the high-priestly help offered to believers by Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews continues with his theme that Jesus is supremely great; greater than angels, the author of a great salvation and great enough to become man to accomplish it. Although the writer does not belittle Moses, Jesus is greater even than Moses. The term ‘holy brothers’ shows that the readers are dear to the writer and that they have been set apart for the service of God. They are ‘holy’ because of they have been purified from sin (Hebrews 1:3) by Jesus, ‘the one who makes men holy’ (Hebrews 2:11). They share in the ‘heavenly calling’, showing that the initiative in salvation comes from God who has called them to be his own and will bring ‘many sons to glory’ (Hebrews 2:10). Because Jesus (human name) has taken our nature he is able to help us both as apostle and high priest. This is the only occasion that the New Testament uses the term ‘apostle’ (one sent by God) to describe Jesus, though the idea that God sent him is more frequent. Jesus was sent by the Father to accomplish his purpose. ‘High priest’ reminds us of the sacrificial nature of his mission. Believers are to be ‘confessors’, making a formal, public profession of faith in Christ

He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future.

Moses was not as faithful as he might have been but the writer makes no criticism of the man held in such honour by the Jews as Israel’s greatest and most revered leader. Instead, he prefers to accept Moses as ‘faithful’. Moses was a person worthy of honour but he did not measure up to Jesus, whose faithfulness is much more comprehensive. Moses was said to be faithful in God’s house (Numbers 12:7-8). ‘Although Moses was one of the people of God and, therefore, part of the house (the household of faith, Numbers 12:7), Jesus was builder of the house, rather than part of it, and is worthy of greater honour. Houses do not build themselves. A house argues for a builder, and all that is (creation) argues for God (the creator). There is also a difference, because God is not to be put on a level with any builder of a house. Jesus became fully human so he could call men ‘brothers’ but he is also more than that. Moses was a servant in the house but Jesus is the son within it. The adjective ‘all’ might point to the concern both Moses and Jesus had for the whole house. Others, such as prophets, kings, or priests, dealt with restricted areas.

But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

The name ‘Christ’ is used here for the first time in this letter. Christ is contrasted with Moses ‘as a son over God’s house’. Moses was no more than a member, even though a very distinguished member, of the house. The roles of a servant and of a son in a house are worlds apart. Christ is the son and as such is ‘over’ the household. The writer is thinking not simply of Israel or the Jews but of the people of God. In the Old Testament this had been the people Israel but now it is the church. Christ is the founder of the church, continuous with the Old Testament people of God. The church must take courage for it has something to boast about - its position in God’s house, for redeemed humanity is now the dwelling place of God (1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 2:22; Revelation 21:3). This boasting is connected with ‘hope’

in the promises of God. ‘Courage’ or boldness and the demonstration of hope in word and deed are the continuing mark of those who belong to Christ, but these do not rule out periods of weak faith and struggle.

So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did”

‘Today’ reminds the reader of the importance of immediate action. The comparison between Christ and Moses leads to a comparison between their followers. The beginning of Psalm 95 describes worship which is acceptable to God but closes with a flashback to the false worship of Israel in the wilderness, to which the writer now refers (Psalm 95:7-11), describing these words as being what ‘the Holy Spirit says’. Israel did not walk in fellowship with God but disobeyed and provoked him. Therefore, they did not enter his rest. ‘Do not harden your hearts’ is a reminder not to make the mistake the Israelites made. Hardening the heart means disobeying God and following your own way. This is what Israel did in the wilderness. Here the reference is to the incident when there was no water and the Israelites ‘put the Lord to the test’ (Exodus 17:1-7). They had outwardly seen themselves as God’s flock, but in their hearts they were hard against him and complained to Moses about their lack of water. After God miraculously met their thirst by ordering Moses to strike the rock and bring forth water, Moses named the place Meribah (‘quarreling’) and Massah (‘testing’). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), the place names Meribah and Massah are always translated by words such as those here rendered ‘rebellion’ and ‘testing’. The attitude of the people was not one of quiet trust in God. They lacked faith and failed to appreciate God’s purposes of grace and therefore put God to the test. They ought of have gone forward in faith, since God had done so much for them. Instead, they thought they deserved more than they were getting and were therefore a complaining and argumentative people. This kind of occasion was repeated (ten times, according to Numbers 14:22) throughout the wilderness wanderings until at last God said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways’. So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest’ (Psalm 95:10-11).

That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’

We should not miss the reference to the anger of God. His inevitable reaction to sin is anger. The Israelites living at a particular time showed constancy in error. ‘Heart’ is not simply the emotions but the whole inner being, thoughts, feelings and will. If people really knew the ways of God, they would walk in them, but these people did not know them. Some ignorance might be innocent but this was not excusable. They were blamed because they ought to have known what they did not take the trouble to learn. ‘Knowing the ways of God’ would inevitably mean a different way of living, yet many church members today are content to live lives that are essentially no different than the lives of non-Christians around them.

So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’

The seriousness with which God viewed Israel’s sin is shown by the divine oath. The oath refers to the time when the spies had returned from their survey of the Promised Land (Numbers 14:21 ff.). The word used here (‘wrath’) points to the strong and settled opposition of God’s holy nature to all that is evil. God is not passive in the face of wrongdoing; he actively opposes it. The verb ‘enter’ is often used in Hebrews. Eleven times in chapters 3-4 the author speaks of entering ‘rest’ (peace in the presence of God).

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

The 'sinful, unbelieving heart' stands in marked contrast to the faithfulness ascribed to both Jesus and Moses. In effect, 'turn away' means 'rebel against'. This rebellion is not about a dead doctrine but 'the living God'. For many believers, repentance is something in the past but for the true Christian repentance is something that still happens in the presence. It is something like following another car when driving. At first, this might require a complete change of direction but after constant adjustment is needed to keep on course. In this process engaging with God's word (through preaching and daily devotions) is vital.

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

They must encourage one another constantly and urgently (fellowship). 'Daily' means that the encouragement should be habitual, rather than literally every day. There is a sense of urgency for today does not last for ever. The verb 'hardened' does not refer only to 'the heart' but is quite general. The whole life can be hardened because of 'sin's deceitfulness'.

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

It is important that the believer holds firmly to what God has given him. The great gift to the believer is Christ. Therefore, it is important to know and understand Christ – in worship, in prayer and in study. 'The confidence we had at first' is that experienced when the readers first believed. They had no doubts then, nor should they have any now. 'Till the end' may point to the end of the age or the end of the believer's life.

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?

An outward facade of belief can be maintained while the heart is still unrepentant, and therefore unredeemed. It was the people who were in a position of spiritual privilege and yet sinned grievously who were in mind in Psalm 95. The writer answers his first question with another. This one, about all those Moses led out of Egypt, is phrased so as to expect the answer 'yes'.

And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?

God was angry with them for forty years. The wrath of God was not something transitory and easily avoided. The word rendered 'desert' refers to 'deserted' land, not necessarily incapable of cultivation. It is wilderness country in contrast to cultivated and inhabited land.

And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?

Those who would not enter God's rest were 'those who disobeyed'. God did much for these people, yet in the end they went their own way and refused to obey him.

So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

The author does not say that they did not enter but that they 'were not able to enter'. If we were to guess at the last word surely we would offer 'disobedience', but disobedience is just the outward manifestation of 'unbelief'. It is unbelief that prevents us from entering God's rest. The warning to the people of the writer's day is clear. To slip back from their Christian profession into unbelief would be fatal.

Study 3: Hebrews 4:1-13: Jesus: Superior to Joshua

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

Although the chapter divisions are not part of the original New Testament text and only convenient signposts to help us find our way around the Bible, we can, nevertheless, see that chapter 4 begins with the same word as chapter 3, 'therefore'. Someone has said, 'When you see a "therefore," ask what it is there for.' It is not the best example of English grammar but it does remind us that these connecting words are important and not something to be skipped over. Chapter 3 ends with the solemn situation that faced the desert wanderers who did not enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief. This negative example causes the writer to the Hebrews to exhort his readers to 'be careful', though a better translation of the original text would be 'let us fear', which captures the seriousness of the situation. The writer to the Hebrews is always keen to expound the promises of God, indeed the word translated 'promise' appears more times in Hebrews than any other book in the New Testament. It is important for the believer not to miss out on the promise of God, which is still available and obviously means more than simply entering the Promised Land. In order to be sure of being blessed by the promise, the believer must take the opportunity of reverent reflection to make sure that no one misses out on the promise of entering God's rest. It was disobedience and persistent grumbling, which suggest a heart that is unchanged and unbelieving, that caused a generation of Israelites to miss out on entering the Promised Land. The author is issuing his readers with a solemn reminder that there was a generation to whom God's rest was promised but they missed it. The readers should be on their guard unless they should make the same mistake.

For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

The writer now goes on to explain why the Israelites in the desert did not enter God's rest. The gospel was proclaimed clearly enough through the sacrifices, the tabernacle ritual and the preaching of Moses but the people had no faith in it and it was therefore of no value to them. Turning from ungrateful rebellion to a thankful acceptance of God's provision is the very essence of the faithful response to God. Again, the contrast is clear: the readers of the letter to the Hebrews need to be sure that they respond to the preaching of the gospel with faith. The writer to the Hebrews consistently emphasises the importance of faith (a term he uses 32 times). It is vitally important to make a right response to the Christian message.

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

'We who have believed' stresses the necessity of faith and shows that it is not the physical Israel but the spiritual Israel (those who believe) who enter God's rest. It is important that we understand the full meaning of the word 'rest'. In the Old Testament it meant entering into the Promised Land, with the attendant benefits and blessings (Deuteronomy 25:11; Joshua 11:23; 14:15; 23:1). The great New Testament promise of Jesus, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28) picks up the same theme. If we take 'rest' simply to mean the rest of heaven (beyond death) then this is a promise for the future but if we take 'rest' to mean the Christian experience now then it is a promise for the present. The quotation is from Psalm 95:11. It is clear from this passage that God's rest

was not limited to the earthly rest of Canaan but was available from creation. The earthly rest of Canaan was a symbol of a much greater rest. In the days of scrolls locating a precise quotation could be much more difficult. The writer to the Hebrews is not so much interested in the precise reference (Genesis 2:2) but that it is God who has spoken. In the creation story the account of each of the first six days concludes with the formula, 'and there was evening, and there was morning,' but this does not apply to the seventh day. Instead, scripture simply records that God rested from all his work. This need not imply that God did nothing for there is a sense in which God is always at work (John 5:17). It means that God completed his perfect creation, in the knowledge that all that he had made was very good (Genesis 1:31). The 'rest' of the believer, whether we take that to be only heavenly or earthly as well, is not idleness but the joy and peace that come from knowing that God's saving work is done. A second quotation (Psalm 95:11) shows that the Israelites did not enter God's rest because his judgment came upon them.

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

Again the writer makes the comparison between those who are still able to enter God's rest and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them but did not go in because of their disobedience. Entering this rest must not be delayed. A third quotation (Psalm 95:7) reinforces this point. It is possible for people to hear the voice of God in their inner soul but, for whatever reason, delay putting their trust in God and obeying him. Such delay hardens the heart. Far from becoming easier with time repentance becomes more and more difficult. 'Today' carries with it a message of hope. The time has not run out but, like every day, 'today' is finite and will run out.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

Although it is not immediately obvious to us the Hebrew name 'Joshua' is the same as the Greek name 'Jesus'. After the wanderings in the desert, Joshua led the people into the Promised Land but that was not the ultimate fulfilment of the promise of God. Hundreds of years, after Israel entered Canaan, God repeated his promise of rest through David (Psalm 95) showing that there is a greater 'Sabbath-rest' (Sabbath means 'seven'). An idea that is often repeated in Hebrews is one of earthly (temporary) shadow and heavenly (eternal) reality. The rest of Canaan was, therefore, an earthly shadow of the heavenly reality of 'Sabbath-rest', the kind of rest that God has enjoyed since he rested from his work of creation. The weekly Sabbath was only a shadow of the true rest of God. Paul (Colossians 2:16-17) says that religious festivals, New Moon celebration and Sabbath days are 'a shadow of the things that were to come, the reality, however, is found in Christ'. Ceasing one's own work implies trusting in the work of God instead. The believer is saved by grace through faith and not by works. The work of Jesus is therefore superior to that of Joshua for he gives eternal rest to all who believe in him. We cannot depend on our efforts to please God, though we do make decisions and exert efforts. We cease from our own works and look to his working within us to achieve the results that please him. Again, the question arises whether this rest takes place only after death (as seen in Revelation 14:13) or also in this life. Believing is certainly a matter of trusting entirely in the completed work of Christ and it is possible for the believer to know a depth of peace and joy which anticipates heaven. Methodists have traditionally classed this state with the 'rest' of heaven.

Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

The exhortation to ‘make every effort’ sounds strange immediately after a passage encouraging a believer to enter into the rest of God but effort is needed to resist self-dependence. If we think that we can please God by our own efforts we shall only end up ‘rest-less’. Instead, the believers are to learn from the example of the earlier people, who had perished, not following their example of disobedience but being obedient. Disobedience and obedience are revealed by the word of God.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The word ‘for’ ties this paragraph to the preceding verse showing what the Israelites that fell in the wilderness failed to heed. The word of God, which is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword, is capable of exposing the thoughts and attitudes of the human heart. God knows us thoroughly and totally (Psalm 139:1-18). A complete disclosure of our innermost selves exposes our unbelief and disobedience. The ministry of the word of God is therefore crucial to the well-being of the people of God. In the Old Testament the word of God was proclaimed by the prophets and the scriptures became the basis of synagogue worship. In the New Testament, the ministry of the Lord Jesus and later the apostles was a Christian exposition of the Old Testament scriptures. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the basis of Christian teaching. In an age where most people could not read the gathering together for the reading and proclamation of the word of God was fundamental to the Christian community. Today’s believers are in jeopardy if they either do not hear or do not respond to the faithful proclamation of the word of God. The church, properly so called, is ‘a congregation of the faithful ... in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance’ (*Thirty-nine Articles*, XIX). We should not take the references to ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ to be a precise description of the nature of human beings. The writer to the Hebrews is simply saying God’s word can reach the innermost parts of our being, our thoughts and our feelings. Nothing is beyond the scope of the word of God. It is impossible to hide anything from him. Consequently, George H. Guthrie writes:

Our communities of faith need to be places of real worship, reverence, and radical openness to that Word. When those who are “playing church,” stranded between Egypt and Canaan, truly enter into his presence and are confronted with his holiness, they will have their flippant, shallow “churchianity” stripped away.

He also quotes Donald W. McCullough (*The Trivialization of God*): ‘visit a church on Sunday morning — almost any will do — and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery.’

STUDY 5: Hebrews 4:14-5:14: Jesus: Superior to Aaron

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

‘Therefore’ relates to the passage immediately before, where nothing is hidden from the sight of God to whom men and women must give account. Yet, because of Jesus, the believer is able to ‘approach the throne of grace with confidence’ (‘boldly’). In the Old Testament the high priest functioned as the main representative between the people and God. The Old Testament refers to him variously as ‘the priest’ (Ex. 31:10), ‘the anointed priest’ (Lev. 4:3), ‘the chief priest’ (2 Chron. 26:20), and the ‘high priest’ (2 Kings 12:10). The high priesthood was hereditary (Exodus 29:29-30; Lev. 16:32), a fact to which the writer to the Hebrews will give attention later. Although the high priest shared a number of duties with the other priests, he alone entered the Most Holy Place (Holy of Holies) on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-25). The writer says that Jesus has gone through the heavens. Jews sometimes thought of their being levels of heaven. What is clear is that Jesus has gone through to the heavenly sanctuary. Nevertheless, Jesus is not remote from us (Psalm 103:14). He is not unsympathetic to human weakness because he shares our humanity (2:17). We must not infer that somehow life was easy for Jesus. He knew what it was to experience temptation and yet, no matter how far it persisted, he did not succumb to it. The immediate context in which the writer was interested might have been the context of suffering. We can easily think that the temptations that Jesus experienced were only confined to the early part of his ministry (Matthew 4) but it is likely that the temptations to circumvent the way of the cross or to ‘come down from the cross’ were very real. The ‘throne of grace’ is the ‘mercy seat’ of the old tabernacle, where God met with sinful humans because of the sacrificial blood sprinkled upon it. The greatness of Jesus is emphasised by the title ‘Son of God’. The writer to the Hebrews says, ‘let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence’. In the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement, the high priestly offering made for the people still did not admit them into God’s presence but under the high priesthood of Jesus the believer can enter God’s presence with confidence. The inclusive ‘us’ rules out the need for any priest other than Jesus. A believer can approach the throne of grace, in prayer and ultimately in eternity, because of the high priestly work of Jesus. We need mercy (not getting what we deserve) because we have failed so often and grace to equip us for the service of God.

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

The writer turns now to the qualifications for a high priest (vv. 1-10). The order in which things are presented might seem a bit strange to us because it is structured as a chiasmus. This form (where in the second half of a passage the elements of the first half are repeated in reverse order – rather like the image in a mirror) was used by the ancients for dramatic effect and to make it easy to memorise. A high priest must be one with the people and therefore be ‘selected from among men’ because he ‘is appointed to represent them in matters related to God’. His work is to offer ‘gifts and sacrifices for sins. He must show compassion and ‘deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray’, which he can do because he realises his own weakness.

No-one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father.

No one can make himself a priest. It is a divine appointment (Exodus 28:1-3). The Bible records disasters that came upon those who took it upon themselves to perform priestly duties (Numbers 16; 1 Samuel 13:8ff.; 2 Chronicles 26:16ff.) Aaron was appointed by God and the Levitical priests followed in his succession. The high priest explained the purposes of the offerings and dealt with the people's problems. Jesus, fulfilling all the conditions, is also a high priest, though the writer will not say more about his offering gifts and sacrifices for sins until later (8:3). Some Jewish writers thought that there would be two Messiahs, one who was King (in the line of David) and another high priest (in the line of Aaron). No other New Testament writer speaks of Jesus as high priest. The writer to the Hebrews shows Jesus is priest as well as King. Jesus, the Son, is one who has rights in heaven (Psalm 2:7).

"And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

The quotation is from Psalm 110:4. Melchizedek is mentioned eight times in Hebrews, in this Psalm and only in one other place in the Bible (Genesis 14:18). The Lord Jesus Christ does everything that a priest does but whereas the work of earthly priests is symbolic and temporary the work of Jesus is effective and eternal. 'Of the order of Melchizedek' is better translated 'of the same kind as Melchizedek'. In other words, Jesus was a 'Melchizedek kind of priest' and not like Aaron and his successors.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Here we see the genuineness of Jesus' humanity ('Jesus life on earth' is literally 'in the days of his flesh'). These verses explain how a sinless person could feel his own weaknesses (for example in Gethsemane). It is difficult to know what 'he was heard because of his reverent submission' means because Jesus eventually died on the cross, the cup that he asked to be taken from him. Yet, his prayer was also marked by faithfulness and trust, showing that God sometimes answers prayer in a way that achieves his ultimate purpose but not necessarily according to our plans. The very thought of the crushing burden of sin, laid upon him on the cross, was profound suffering on its own. Jesus saw our sins as his and, therefore, has the experience to deal gently with our sins, since he is aware of the personal defilement of sin. When the writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus 'learned obedience' and was 'made perfect', he is not suggesting that the Son had been disobedient and flawed. Jesus 'learned obedience' because the natural desire would have been to escape. The perfection that has actually suffered (practical perfection) is different from the perfection that is only ready to suffer (theoretical perfection). Through his death upon the cross, his resurrection and ascension into glory, the ministry of Jesus is complete (perfect). The path of faithful obedience that Jesus took is the pattern for us all – but it comes only when our prayers accept 'thy will be done'. 'Eternal salvation' is found only here in the New Testament (see also Isaiah 45:17). Salvation in Jesus brings people life in this world and the world to come. Jesus secured salvation by his obedience and now offers it to those who obey. Having learned obedience in Gethsemane, Jesus is now perfectly qualified to become both the sin offering (9:14) and the high priest who offers it. This is greater than the work of Aaron so that Jesus is again designated as 'high priest in the order of Melchizedek' (2:17-18).

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Suddenly, the writer to the Hebrews considers the spiritual state of the readers. The writer's concerns about their spiritual immaturity (that they are in danger of repeating the unbelief of the Israelites in the wilderness) are now spelled out clearly. They are spiritually 'sluggish' and 'lazy'. If they had been growing as they should, they would be able to grasp these great truths of the faith and be teaching others. They are (lit. 'have become') slow to learn and are immature (spiritual babies) because they are 'not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness'. Consequently, those who should be teachers need to be taught. They need to be taught the 'elementary truths' (NEB translates this phrase 'the ABC of God's oracles'.) 'You need milk' literally means 'you have become having need of milk'. It reminds us that in the Christian life it is possible to go backwards as well as forwards but almost impossible to stand still. 'Milk' is elementary instruction in the Christian faith and life. The Christian occupied with this is spiritually 'still an infant' and must be treated as such. It is faith in the righteousness of Christ, as distinguished from 'self-righteousness' or 'works-righteousness', that is fundamental to the Christian and yet so many people seem to find it hard to grasp. Failing to 'distinguish good from evil' is a mark of immaturity. The mature, by persistent obedience to the truth, are able to have 'solid food' and discern good from evil. To grow towards maturity, believers need to begin with the truths they know but have not been obeying. Further light is not given until we obey the light that we have. It is reviewing and claiming the promises of God that is the 'constant use' of which the writer speaks. This growth makes us ready to handle the solid food (Ephesians 4:14).

STUDY 6: Hebrews 6:1-20: Jesus: A superior promise

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

Studies 3 (Hebrews 3:1), 4 (Hebrews 4:1) and 5 (Hebrews 4:14) have all begun with the word ‘therefore’ and, once again, we must not allow the chapter divisions to separate this passage from all that has gone before. The writer to the Hebrews is not going to return to the elementary teachings of the faith – the readers already know these, what they lack is personal commitment to them. Unlike most new Christians today, those who went backwards in faith would go back to their former religious life (Judaism). The teachings that the writer mentions are the rudiments of Christian faith, which Jesus and the apostles preached. They must no longer trust in acts that lead to death or useless rituals (see NIV footnote) instead the essence of their response to the good news must be repentance and faith. Baptism and the laying on of hands relate to the beginning of the Christian life (initiation). ‘Faith in God’ is far more than a theoretical belief in God. Rather it is a personal trust in God, made known in Jesus Christ. The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgments relate to the last things (eschatology). The practice of Christian baptism seems to have its roots in Jewish ritual washing, as practised by John the Baptist. Like baptism, the practice of the laying on of hands seems to be borrowed from Judaism. Its main purpose is to identify a particular person as the subject of prayer (to receive the Holy Spirit, Acts 8:17; for healing, Acts 28:8, for commissioning, Acts 13:3, 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). Pharisees believed in the resurrection (Acts 23:6) but it is difficult to say that resurrection holds the central place in Judaism that it does in Christian faith (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2). Judgment is clearly taught in the Old Testament (Isaiah 33:22; Genesis 18:25) and this completes what the writer to the Hebrews classifies as the elementary teachings. The writer to the Hebrews realises that it is only with the help of God that believers can move on.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

These are some of the most controversial and difficult verses in the whole of the New Testament. Is the author talking about genuine Christians who fall from faith? Is he saying that there is no way back for such people? If so, is the writer contradicting other passages of scripture which teach that Christians are preserved by God (John 6:37; 10:27-29; traditionally called the ‘perseverance of the saints’ but *preservation* is better)? Is the writer simply offering a hypothetical example, in which case why is he going to the trouble of giving such a solemn warning? Or is the writer thinking only of someone who appears to be a believer but in fact is unregenerate (e.g. Simon Magus, Acts 8:21-23)?

Falling away from Christian faith (apostasy) must be distinguished from backsliding. A Christian either makes progress or slips back – it is impossible to stand still – but what does ‘falling away’ mean? ‘Enlightened’ would appear to mean ‘having come to the light of Christ’ but tasting the ‘heavenly gift’ is more difficult to explain, as is sharing ‘in the Holy Spirit’. Tasting the ‘goodness of the word of God’ suggests hearing something of God’s word to mankind. ‘The powers of the coming age’ suggests powers that are not normally experienced in this life (Hebrews 2:4; Isaiah 35:56). The verb translated ‘fall away’ (Gk.

parapipto) is found only here in the New Testament (*hapax legomenon*) and yet its meaning (fall away from Christianity) seems clear enough. Perhaps an insight can be gained from the book of Job. Job has been a man of great faith and yet in adversity is invited to ‘curse God and die’ (Job 2:9). Perhaps it is possible to become deliberately and irrevocably apostate but not to backslide in such away as to fall from grace accidentally (but see John 10:28). Nevertheless, the whole issue is clearly serious, so much so, that a backslidden state is never the place to be.

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Land that is watered produces a crop, which is useful to those for which it is farmed. Some land, however, produces ‘thorns and thistles’ (cf. Genesis 3:17ff.) and more rain (which should be a blessing) only produces more weeds. The fruitful land awaits a blessing but the other land awaits a curse. It is a solemn warning to professing Christians whose lives produce only the equivalent of weeds (cf. John 15:2, 6).

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case - things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

After giving them a solemn warning, the writer to the Hebrews gives the readers some encouragement. He addresses them as ‘dear friends’ (Gk. *agapetoi*, ‘beloved’) and does not think that they will be caught up in the condemnation to which he has referred. His confidence rests upon the faithfulness of God, who is not unjust (Genesis 18:25). God will not forget their work and their love for him (lit. ‘to his name’). This is not salvation by good works, but good works (1 John 4:19-21) and love for God are important parts of the fruitful life. The standard set in the past has to continue ‘to the very end’. The phrase, ‘in order to make your hope sure’ (lit. ‘the fullness of hope’), is unusual (see Colossians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; Hebrews 10:22 ‘full assurance of faith’). ‘In order that you may have full assurance of faith’, probably catches the idea of the full development of hope. The familiar trio of faith (v. 12), hope (v. 11) and love (v. 10) appear here, as they do later (Hebrews 10:22-24) and often in the writings of Paul. Another familiar Christian characteristic is ‘patience’, which is the quality of not giving in to difficulties. The New Testament use of the word ‘inherit’ does not necessarily mean the formal kind of inheritance that is familiar to us through a will. Here it simply means that they can be certain of receiving what has been promised. In short, the readers have had good examples and they are exhorted to follow them.

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

A great example of faith waiting patiently was Abraham, a patriarch to whom the writer to the Hebrews frequently refers. To show the absolute reliability of his word, God swore by himself. When Abraham was in Haran, God promised that he would have many descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). This promise was repeated at Shechem (Gen 12:6-7) and on several occasions after that. Nevertheless, Abraham still had to wait for 25 years until he was 100 years old for the birth of Isaac, when Sarah was long passed bearing children, but God is

utterly reliable and what he has promised will come to pass in his time. Abraham would have been prepared to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (which later became the Temple Mount at Jerusalem) if God had not dramatically intervened at the last moment. God renewed his promise of many descendants and confirmed it with an oath (Genesis 22:17). As Isaac had already been born it seems that this promise was fulfilled 60 years later (Genesis 25:26) when Jacob and Esau were born to Isaac and Rebekah (but see also John 8:56). The writer to the Hebrews gives this as an example of being patient and waiting for God to act (Psalm 37:5, 7).

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

To make an oath by someone greater than yourself was a way of making a solemn promise and such an oath put an end to all argument. Although God had no need to swear an oath, he wanted to make it absolutely clear that his promise was binding and would be fulfilled. God made the promise and guarantees it in his own name. The promise was not confined to Abraham or his immediate family but extended to his heirs, including not only physical Israel but also the spiritual descendants (Galatians 3:7). The 'two unchangeable things' are the promise and the oath. The writer to the Hebrews does not define what the believer has fled from but it seems clear that this is life in the sinful world. The metaphor of the anchor (made more familiar by the famous hymn, *Will your anchor hold?* and the Boys' Brigade) is only used here in the New Testament. A ship drifting without anchor is in danger. Here hope is an anchor that keeps the soul firm and secure (A.V. 'sure and stedfast'). The writer does not use 'soul' as distinct from 'body' but simply to indicate the whole person. Hope is not some vague wish that all will work out well in the end. It is the Melchizedek ministry of Jesus. This hope enters the 'inner sanctuary behind the curtain'. He is ready, as our great high priest, to give 'comfort, strength, forgiveness, love, joy and peace to any who flee to him for refuge in time of trouble' (Steadman). The reference is to the 'Most Holy Place' (Exodus 26:33) which symbolised the very presence of God, but which only the high priest was allowed to enter. Here, Jesus has entered on our behalf, as a high priest, not in the earthly sanctuary but into heaven. Unlike the priests of Aaron, Jesus has the power of an endless life.

STUDY 7: Hebrews 7:1-28: Jesus: A superior priesthood

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.

Reference has been made to Melchizedek earlier (5:6; 5:10; 6:20) and now the writer to the Hebrews gives more detail. The question that might have been in the readers' mind is simple enough? How could Jesus (of the tribe of Judah) also be a priest (2:17), as priests were of the tribe of Levi? Melchizedek, whose name means 'king of righteousness', is only mentioned twice in the Old Testament (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 110:4). In Genesis (14:18-20) Abraham returned from his conquest of the four invading kings and met Melchizedek in the Valley of Shaveh (the Kings's Valley), possibly the valley of Kidron at Jerusalem. Melchizedek, king of Salem (Jerusalem, Psalm 76:2) or 'peace', strengthened Abraham with bread and wine and blessed him. Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe (one tenth) of his goods because he was priest of God Most High. The writer to the Hebrews sees Melchizedek as prefiguring the ministry of Jesus. Melchizedek was both king and priest and, because he is a priest of that order, so is Jesus, who strengthens and refreshes those who come to him for help (4:16). There is no mention in scripture of Melchizedek's genealogy, birth or death, but does that mean he is an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ (a theophany)? More likely, 'it seems that what was true of Melchizedek, simply as a matter of record, was true of Christ in a fuller and more literal sense' (Gabelein). In fact, it is not so much that Jesus is like Melchizedek but that Melchizedek is, in some senses, like Jesus.

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people - that is, their brothers - even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

The writer to the Hebrews now shows that the priesthood of Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priesthood (in the line of Aaron). No less than Abraham, the patriarch to whom great promises had been given, paid a tithe to Melchizedek. The Law required that the people pay tithes to the Levites but, even before the Law had been given, Melchizedek had a natural superiority, standing out from all the others. Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek. The word is used in a particular way here, showing that this would have been a solemn act of prayer in which normally the lesser is blessed by the greater. To the Hebrew people, Abraham was the great patriarch, but Melchizedek is shown to be greater. The Levitical priests are mortal and eventually die, but the one who ministers in the order of Melchizedek lives for ever (Psalm 110:4). 'One might even say' is a way of prefacing a statement that might startle the reader. Levi is said to be the one that collects the tithes, even though it is his descendants that actually continue to do so. Abraham was the great-grandfather of Levi. Therefore, as descendants of Abraham, there was a sense in which Levi and his descendants paid a tithe to Melchizedek. The writer wants us to be in no doubt about the superiority of Christ, the priest in the order of Melchizedek, to all other priests.

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come - one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

'Perfection' here means a condition acceptable to God. It was because of the inadequacies of the Levitical priesthood and law that another priest had to come, not in the order of Aaron but the order of Melchizedek. We should not see the law and priesthood as separate. With the change of priesthood came also a change of law. This priesthood in the order of Melchizedek brings the Levitical priesthood to an end. The law (of Moses), with the tabernacle and sacrifices, was given to support the priesthood, so that by the demands of the law people would be awakened to their true condition (see also Romans 5:20; Galatians 3:19-23). This was a shadow of the reality that was to come (as seen in Jesus in the New Testament). So with the end of the Levitical priesthood comes also the end of the Law of Moses. The priesthood of Jesus was different because he belonged not to the tribe of Levi but to the tribe of Judah, the royal tribe, from which no priest had ever served at the altar. Moses did not say anything about priests from that tribe, so the priesthood of Jesus does not rest upon Moses and the law. The word the NIV translates 'descended' literally means 'has arisen' (similar to the sun rising or the springing up of shoots from a plant). The Greek word used here is not all that usual and one of the few other uses of it in Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 9:2 (Matthew 4:16). The death and resurrection of Jesus shows that he is a priest of a permanent priesthood, on the basis of his indestructible life. The testimony of scripture confirms this, 'you are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.'

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

The Levitical priesthood and law is set aside because, having prepared the way for the coming of Christ, its purpose was fulfilled. The law could convict of sin but not make someone acceptable to God. A better hope, by which we can draw near to God, is made available in the priesthood of Jesus.

And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

The new hope available from the new Melchizedek will be delivered as promised because God has promised it (Psalm 110:4). The Levitical priests became priests without any oath – presumably indicating the transitory nature of their work. The priesthood of Jesus is permanent and God will not change his mind. The writer now uses the word 'covenant' for the first of seventeen times. Jesus is now the guarantee of the better covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). He guarantees to humankind that God will fulfil his covenant of forgiveness. He guarantees to God that those in him are acceptable.

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able

to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

There had been many Levitical priests, since they died and others needed to take over, but it is because Jesus lives forever that he can guarantee ultimate results (Jude 24). He does this by his ministry of intercession (Romans 8:34). This is an important verse for Methodists as the expression 'save completely' or 'save to the uttermost' (7:25) is one of the verses used to sum up the Methodist hope in becoming 'holy' or 'Christlike'. We know that the perfect likeness of Christ grows gradually within the Christian but that there are also characteristics of the old (Adamic) nature even within believers. When the body dies the old life ends but the new life, formed by the Spirit, continues. The question 'is it possible for love to exclude sin in this life' is answered 'yes' by Methodists and those in the 'holiness tradition' (Salvation Army and some Pentecostal groups) and 'no' by most other Christians.

Such a high priest meets our need - one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Because of his nature (who he is), Jesus can do what he does. The perfect high priest is different from the Levitical priests. He is holy (morally flawless), blameless (without evil, as perfect outwardly as he is holy inwardly), pure (without stain) and set apart from sinners (untainted by the defilement around him) and consequently exalted above the heavens (1:3; Ephesians 1:21). Other high priests had to make offering for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people but, because of his sinlessness (4:15), Jesus did not need to make a sacrifice for his own sins. Nevertheless, he offered himself as a sacrifice once and for all (finally or completely). This brought to an end the Levitical system of animal sacrifices and with it the priesthood and the law. Jesus, our great high priest, is, therefore, not only God's provision for our sins, but also his provision for daily help in our life because of his wisdom, patience, greatness and power.

STUDY 8: Hebrews 8:1-13: Jesus: A superior covenant

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.

In the preceding verses, the writer to the Hebrews has shown that the priesthood of Jesus (in the order of Melchizedek) is a superior priesthood to the Levitical priesthood (in the order of Aaron). Unlike us, the first readers of the letter would have been familiar with the ministry of the Levitical priests and the writer wants them to be clear that the ministry of Jesus is far superior to it. Rather as we might conclude something that we have described that has been quite long and detailed by saying ‘so the point is’, the writer to the Hebrews has set the stage for his main point and now summarises it. We have a high priest who is so great that he took his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (a reverent way of referring to God). To be at the right hand is the place of highest honour and to be seated shows that the work is complete. Jesus is the one who serves in the heavenly sanctuary. The ideas of Jesus glorified and serving run side by side. ‘Sanctuary’ translates words that literally mean ‘of holy things’, which the writer explains are the heavenly tabernacle. The tabernacle was the tent used for worship during the wilderness wanderings. The writer makes it clear that the earthly tent corresponds to a heavenly reality (3:5-6), where Christ’s ministry is exercised – rather like a shadow corresponds to the shape of the real thing. ‘True’ is used in the sense of the original of which other things are copies (as we might say with a limited edition print, ‘the original is in the National Gallery’).

Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

We noted previously that high priests are appointed to offer sacrifices (5:1). Offering sacrifices is the essence of priestly work. The nature of Jesus’ sacrifice, the offering of himself (7:27), has already been introduced and this will be considered more fully later (9:14). We do not need to conclude that Jesus is still offering sacrifice. That work is completed but he is able, on the basis of that completed self-offering, to make intercession for us. The writer draws out the contrast between the earthly priesthood according to the law and the heavenly priesthood. Jesus was not an earthly priest and performed no priestly functions in the early sanctuary. The ministry of priests in the sanctuary made according to the pattern of heaven is one of great dignity but the ministry of Jesus is greater because his work is exercised in the true sanctuary in heaven.

‘Mediator’ is a legal term referring to one who arbitrates between two parties. In the Old Testament, the relationship of the people to God was viewed in terms of covenant and mediation was offered by the priests. However, this only foreshadowed something greater. Christ mediates between men and God and it is he who establishes the new covenant. At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup, passed it to his disciples and said: “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:27-28). Whereas Moses had used the blood of an animal (Exodus 24:8), Jesus used wine as a symbol of his own blood. The new covenant that Jesus inaugurates is better than

the old because it is ‘founded on better promises’ – the promises are listed by Jeremiah (an inner understanding of truth, an intimate relationship with God and an absolute forgiveness of all sins), whom the writer will shortly quote.

For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them,” declares the Lord.

The very existence of the new covenant implies the limitations of the old covenant (Romans 7:10 f.). Two things were found wrong with the old covenant. The people did not fulfil its conditions and, since it was not written on their minds or hearts, it was not sufficiently powerful to motivate them to obedience. The writer to the Hebrews shows how the new covenant fulfils what Jeremiah prophesied (31:31-34) when the two divisions of the kingdom will be reunited into one people (Ezekiel 37:15-23). A covenant is not a ‘deal’ or contract between equals for work or goods but a gracious offer from God. God’s grace has been seen clearly in the past (he ‘took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt’).

New Testament support for a time when Israel will be saved is found in Paul’s words, paraphrasing Isaiah 59:20-21: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins” (Rom. 11:26-27).

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

The writer to the Hebrews applies this new covenant to the church (a spiritual Israel). The provisions of the new covenant are remarkable. The promise, ‘I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts,’ is not about the outward works of religion, rather it is about internal change. The Christian knows this from personal experience. The promise ‘I will be their God, and they will be my people,’ indicates a new sense of belonging to God. Believers are not outside of the covenant community but are members of a family, with God as loving, heavenly Father. The covenant does not avoid the fact that men and women do wicked things but God, in Jesus Christ, has already made provision to deal with human sin so that he may continue to treat people as his beloved children. There are people who wrongly think that repentance secures our forgiveness but that puts the ground of salvation back onto us. It is not our sense of regret or even a promise to do better, however sincerely made, that makes us right with God. The ground of our salvation is the death of Christ on our behalf. All who enter the new covenant will have knowledge of God and, therefore, there will be no need for one to instruct a fellow-citizen (neighbour). The knowledge of God will not be confined to a privileged few. All those in the new covenant will have their own intimate and personal knowledge of their God.

By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.

When this ‘new’ covenant takes effect, there is no longer any reason to rely upon the old one. In the Old Testament the law of Israel can be divided into the moral law, the national law and

the ceremonial law. It is clear from the teachings of Jesus that he has no intention of doing away with the moral law (the 10 Commandments) because he teaches that it will last as long as the heavens and the earth (Matthew 5:18). The national law, relating to the theocratic state of Israel, does not apply to believers today and the ceremonial law (relating to the sacrificial system of the tabernacle and temple) has been superseded in the death of Christ. The Aaronic priesthood, under which the law was given, has now been replaced by the eternal priesthood of Jesus in the order of Melchizedek. The writer's remark, that what is 'obsolete and ageing will soon disappear' suggests that the writer did not yet know of the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70).

STUDY 9: Hebrews 9:1-28: Jesus: A superior ministry

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

In continuing to compare the old covenant with the new covenant, the writer to the Hebrews compares worship in the old covenant with the ministry of Christ and to do so the author uses the tabernacle (Exodus 24-25) rather than the Jerusalem Temple, presumably because that would move the focus away from the Jerusalem Temple and into the scriptures which all Jews knew well from their synagogue worship. Also, at the time of the tent in the wilderness, the ark of the covenant had not been lost (Jewish tradition suggests that the ark of the covenant was lost during the time of the early prophets). There are two different ways of approaching God and the writer will give a description of the first way.

In the old covenant the way of worship was carefully set out with its regulations and its 'earthly' sanctuary. In the wilderness this was a tent (NIV tabernacle) very precisely prepared in three main parts. The outer court, entered through a single gate, contained the brazen altar of sacrifice and the brass basin (or laver), used for the cleansing of the priests. Behind the first curtain was the Holy Place which had the seven-branched lampstand (Exodus 25:31 and 37:17) and the table of consecrated bread (Leviticus 24:5-9). Now the writer speaks of a 'second curtain' between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (*Hagia Hagion*, Holy of Holies). 'Golden altar' (NIV) is probably a preferable translation to 'golden censer' (KJV). It seems this altar was in front of the curtain (Exodus 30:6) but that the writer mentions it in one breath with the gold-covered ark of the covenant – the altar belongs to the inner sanctuary but for practical purposes is in front of the curtain. The ark of the covenant contained the golden jar of manna (Exodus 16:32-34), Aaron's rod that had budded (Numbers 17:8-11) and the 'the stone tablets of the covenant' (Exodus 32:15). Little is known about the cherubim of the Glory. They had wings (Exodus 25:18-20; 37:7-9) and were associated with the presence of God (Psalm 80:1; 99:1), which was revealed in the *Shekinah* or glowing light. The cherubim overshadowed the 'atonement cover' (mercy seat), which was where the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). The writer would like to discuss this further but feels that he does not have the time.

When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings - external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Having described the sanctuary, the writer now moves to the actual ritual, particularly the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The priests did their work in the 'outer room' (first tent), burning incense (Exodus 30:7-8), setting out the holy loaves (Leviticus 24:8-9), and trimming the lamps (Exodus 27:20-21; Lev 24:3-4) but the High Priest ministered in the 'inner room'

(second tent), though only once a year (i.e. on one day each year). As a sinner, the High Priest, made the offering 'for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance'. By using the pattern of the tabernacle, the Holy Spirit showed the people that they had no direct access into the presence of God (the Most Holy Place). While this method of entering God's presence was still in force ('still standing'), direct access to God was limited (but things will be shown to be different because of the finished work of Christ).

The first way of approaching God is now compared with the second. The writer contrasts the limited access of Old Testament times to the free access to God that Christ has made possible for his people. In the old covenant, the sacrifices, which were offered over and over again, could not clear the conscience of the worshippers. The emphasis in the old covenant was external but Christ has brought in a new order. The curtain (veil) that stood before the Most Holy Place was a barrier to the presence of God but this was only a sign. When Christ died the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51).

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

In contrast with all that went before, Christ made an offering that was effective and its blessings are already here. His ministry was in a tabernacle that is not man-made and not part of this creation (a reference to heaven or possibly a reference to his own body). In any event, Christ has secured for his people an effective salvation and this has nothing to do with earthly sacrifices. There is no notion of Christ taking his own blood into heaven – all his atoning work was completed on the cross. He entered heaven 'by his own blood' because of his death on the cross 'once for all'. There can be no repetition because he has secured 'eternal redemption'. 'Redemption' is literally setting free by the payment of a ransom price. It forces the image too much to ask such questions as 'to whom was the ransom paid'. A helpful modern notion is 'compensation' in which the emphasis is on the justice of paying to put something right. Again, the writer returns to the contrast between the blood of animal sacrifices with the external cleansing from ritual defilement and the incomparable greatness of Christ with his work for us that cleanses our consciences. 'The blood of Christ' means his sacrificial death. 'Unblemished' was the word used for animals approved for sacrifice. The unusual reference to the eternal Spirit brings out the truth that there is an eternal aspect to Christ's saving work. Those who are purified by Christ are fit to serve the living God.

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance - now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

The death of Christ is God's way of saving people from their sins. To illustrate this further, the writer to the Hebrews shows that the death of Christ is like the death of a testator in a will which brings the covenant promises into effect. In this will Christ is both testator and executor. This inheritance is eternal, for the salvation that Christ has won is forever. The sacrifices offered under the old covenant cannot take away sins but through his self-offering Christ has achieved what the old offerings pointed to but could not accomplish.

In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

A covenant (especially a will) is not something that is negotiated but something which is laid down. Even a perfectly valid will does not come into operation until death takes place. For sin to be forgiven the rule has always been that blood must be shed. In the first covenant, Moses 'proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people'. They were meant to obey God's laws. He also sprinkled blood on the scroll and on the people. Water, scarlet wool and hyssop were mentioned in the rite of cleansing of lepers (Leviticus 14:4-6) and hyssop in connection with the Passover (Exodus 12:22). There is a sense in which the blood of animal sacrifices offered a temporary reprieve until the true sacrifice came. The words, 'this is the blood of the covenant' may be an allusion to the Last Supper (Mark 14:24). The cleansing with blood at the inauguration of the covenant was also used to purify the place of worship for under the old covenant sprinkling with blood was the accepted way of cleansing. A very poor person might make a cereal offering (Leviticus 5:11-13) and some purification could be made with water (Leviticus 15:10) or fire and water (Numbers 31:22-23) but the whole system pointed to blood as the means of putting away sin and impurity.

It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

The writer to the Hebrews turns his attention from the earthly ritual to the heavenly sanctuary. The sacrifice of Christ was the perfect sacrifice. The rule that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' is universal – but in the heavenly order better sacrifices are needed than those provided under the old covenant. It is difficult to understand why heavenly things need cleansing. It could simply be in the sense of 'consecrating' but there are also plenty of New Testament references to forces of evil beyond our earthly existence (Ephesians 6:12; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Romans 8:38-39). The plural 'sacrifices' is somewhat unexpected for it has been made clear that the sacrifice of Christ was once for all. However, this is probably simply a parallel with the effects of multiple sacrifices of the old covenant that are matched by the multiple benefits of the one sacrifice of Christ. The earthly sanctuary is a 'copy' (foreshadowing) of the real one in heaven (possibly heaven itself).

After his atoning work done once for all, Christ now appears before God, in his capacity as the one who died as a better sacrifice (9:23) for sins. He did not make repeated offerings (like the high priests) because his self-offering was effective and did not need repeating and

because he did not use an external means (an animal sacrifice) but his own blood. The purpose of Christ's coming was 'to do away with sin' by his decisive self-offering. The death of ordinary men and the death of Christ are now compared. Men are 'destined to die once'. This is something outside of their control but it is not the complete end of the story for after death it is time to appear before God. However, when Christ died it was to bear the penalty of sin (cf. 1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:11-12) and when he comes again he will bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Entered the holy place above,
Covered with meritorious scars,
The tokens of His dying love
Our great High-priest in glory bears;
He pleads His passion on the tree,
He shows himself to God for me.

Before the throne my Saviour stands,
My friend and advocate appears;
My name is graven on his hands
And him the Father always hears;
While low at Jesu's Cross I bow,
He hears the blood of sprinkling now.

This instant now I may receive
The answer of his powerful prayer;
This instant now by Him I live,
His prevalence with God declare;
And soon my spirit, in His hands,
Shall stand where my Forerunner stands.

Charles Wesley

STUDY 10: Hebrews 10:1-39: Jesus: A superior sacrifice

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The previous sections have described how the sacrifice of Jesus and the shedding of his blood effective. Now stress is given to the fact that the sacrifice of Jesus is unrepeatable. The previous system under the law was a shadow of the reality that was coming, a preliminary sketch showing the shape of things to come but not the solid reality. If the sacrifices had been effective they would not need to have been repeated. As it was, the sacrifices were repeated as a reminder of sins and showed that something still needed to be done. The blood of animal sacrifices could not cleanse guilt away or deal with a guilty conscience – but the blood of Christ can.

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am --it is written about me in the scroll - I have come to do your will, O God.’” First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

In short, the Levitical sacrifices could not deal with sin. The writer to the Hebrews frequently refers to the Scriptures in order to sum up his argument. Here he refers to Psalm 40 (6-8). The reference to the scroll is probably just a reminder that Christ came to fulfil what was written in the law. The Old Testament system was given by God but was only ever intended to be preliminary. Their function was partial. They pointed the way to what was coming. Animal sacrifices (burnt offerings and sin offerings) could not take away the sins of the people but the sacrifice of Christ perfectly fulfils God’s will in a way that animal sacrifices could never do. Because everything to which the old system pointed has now come to pass, the function of the old system is complete and is no longer necessary. The writer says that the Christian has been ‘made holy’ through the sacrifice of Christ. This is what is often called the ‘imputed righteousness of Christ’ (his righteousness counted as ours). In other places in the New Testament holiness is used in a different sense, the ‘imparted righteousness of Christ’ (his righteousness becoming ours). It is important to note that the contrast between animal sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ is between the death of an uncomprehending animal and the death in which Jesus accepted the will of God with all that it entails. The offering of the body of Jesus was made once for all. This is the distinctive doctrine of Christianity – one great happening, the death of Christ on the cross, is enough for the offer of salvation of the world (globally and eternally).

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws

in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

The Levitical priests continue to offer sacrifices day after day – not least because the sacrifices that they offer cannot take our sins away. That is why they must remain standing, conducting their priestly service in the tabernacle or the temple. Despite their constant activity the work of the priests cannot deal with the basic problem. The priestly work of Jesus is contrasted to that of the Levitical priests. He offered just one sacrifice and then sat down, his work completed (1:3; 8:1). The offering that Jesus made is an offering for all time, never to be repeated. To be seated at God’s right hand is the place of highest honour. While angels stand in the presence of God, Jesus is seated in glory (Mark 14:62-63). No details are given of ‘his enemies’ but the meaning appears to be that Christ rests until all evil is overthrown (the quotation is from Psalm 110:1). Christ has offered the one offering that effects salvation. Saints are perfected by that one offering alone. This plan of salvation takes people who are far from perfect and makes them fit to be in God’s presence for ever. There is never any doubt in the mind of the writer to the Hebrews that God is the author of scripture. Once more he quotes an extract from Jeremiah (31:33ff.) having previously quoted the prophet at greater length (8:7ff.) and concludes that Christ has established the new covenant and has done so by providing for the forgiveness of sins. The finality of Christ’s offering could not be made any clearer – there is nothing further to be done. Where sins have been effectively dealt with there can be no further place for any offering for sin.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Following a long exposition of doctrine, the author offers his readers some words of exhortation based on that doctrine. ‘Therefore’ links the exhortation with all that has preceded it. ‘Brothers’ is an affectionate greeting. All that Christ has accomplished enable believers to approach God and enter into his presence confidently, by the blood of Jesus, that is, on the basis of his saving death. This way to God is both new, because Jesus has created a completely new situation, and living, because that way is bound up with the living Lord Jesus himself (cf. John 14:6). The reference to the ‘curtain’ is a further reference to the tabernacle for it was through this curtain that the high priest had to pass in order to enter the Most Holy Place (Holy of Holies) and the very presence of God. It is difficult to know whether we should take ‘flesh’ with ‘curtain’ or with ‘way’. Charles Wesley renders this idea, ‘Veiled in flesh the Godhead see’. This suggests that through the sacrifice of Christ his body is in a sense ‘torn’ – just as the veil in the temple was torn when he died (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). ‘Great priest’ is synonymous with ‘high priest’. Previously, Jesus had been described as a ‘son over God’s house’ (3:6) and now the two ideas are brought together. Jesus, though worthy of the highest honour, also rendered lowly service. This is followed by three exhortations, ‘let us draw near’, ‘let us hold unswervingly’ and ‘let us consider’ to stir people into action. ‘Heart’ stands for the whole person. It is important that as we approach God that we do so sincerely (Matt. 5:8). ‘Full assurance of faith’ stresses that it is on the basis of the high priestly work of Christ that we are able to draw near to God. Having the ‘body washed’ with water could be a reference to baptism or to the inner washing of the Holy

Spirit. In any event, baptism is the outward sign of an inward cleansing and it is the inward cleansing that is more important. The sprinkling of the heart signifies the cleansing work of the blood of Christ to the inmost being (Exodus 29:21; Leviticus 8:30). The second exhortation is to hold fast the 'hope we profess', which the writer has previously described as an 'anchor for the soul' (6:19). The third exhortation is to consider one another, spurring one another on to (Gk *agape*) and good works. The NIV text of 10:25 is misleading as it is not a fourth exhortation but a convenient way of translating the Greek. Christians need the support of one another. The 'Day' could be the destruction of Jerusalem but is far more likely to be the Day of Judgment.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

After the passage of exhortation, the writer reminds his readers that these are not unimportant matters. God is a God of love but he is also a holy and resolutely opposed to all that is evil. Those who have received the truth, knowing what God has done in Christ, but then revert to an attitude of rejection and continual sin are not covered by the sacrifice for sins that they have rejected. There is no alternative sacrifice and judgment awaits such a person. The judgment of God is 'fearful' (awesome, frightening). Those who leave their faith in Christ and fall back have become the adversaries of God. To despise the law of Moses was a serious matter (all Jews would accept that) and on the testimony of two or three witnesses such a person must be executed (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). So, the situation for the person who despises Christ is far more serious, for the new covenant is better than the old, it is founded on better promises, established by a better sacrifice, for Jesus is greater than Moses. To 'trample under foot' is a strong expression – not simply rejecting the Son of God but despising him. To take the 'shedding of blood' of no less an exalted one than the Lord Jesus Christ lightly, that is to treat his death like any other death, is a dreadful thing. To 'insult the Spirit of grace' shows that the writer sees the Holy Spirit as a divine person, for it is only a person who can be insulted. Wilful sin is an insult to the Spirit. The writer is confident that God speaks and quotes Deuteronomy 32:35, a passage which emphasises that vengeance is a divine prerogative. The second quotation (Deuteronomy 32:36) states clearly that God will act. To fall into the hands of the living God is not something to be casual about.

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

Despite the many warnings, the writer to the Hebrews expresses confidence in the readers. When, in the past, they had experienced persecution, they had come through it. He invites them

to consider the days after they had first believed (received the light). Some of them had been subjected to verbal attacks, insults and other forms of trouble. Others had suffered simply because they were associates of the first group. Christians who visited their friends in prison were identified with them. When their property was confiscated they accepted this joyfully, realising that they had better and lasting possessions. Having been through this, the believers are not now to throw away the confidence that they had in Christ. As Christ has done the will of God, so also Christ's people must be similarly occupied in doing his will. A 'very little while' is a short time indeed (Isaiah 26:20). The writer offers a very loose quotation of Habakkuk 2:3 to bring out the truth that Christ will come in due course. In the intervening time, the readers must patiently await him. This quotation 'the righteous one will live by faith' is the text which the writer will expound in Chapter 11. God is not pleased with the one who shrinks back. It is important to go forward in the faith of Jesus Christ.

STUDY 11: Hebrews 11:1-40: Faith exemplified

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

The following chapter is one of the classic summaries of faith – which, through reference to Old Testament ‘heroes of faith’, the writer summarises as faith in God that enables the believer to press on steadfastly whatever the future may hold. The writer gives ‘characteristics’ of faith rather than a technical definition. ‘Faith’ is a way of life. ‘Being sure’ (Gk *hypostasis*) is the word used earlier and translated ‘confidence’ (3:14). Some things are ‘intangible’ but that does not make them less real. Faith enables us to know that they exist and is the basis of the believer’s life and hope. There are some things that we cannot see but that does not make them ‘unreal’ – by faith we can be ‘certain’ of these too. The ancients (literally ‘the elders’, Gk *presbyteroi*) knew the witness of living faith but such faith is not consigned to the past. It is by faith that *we* understand God’s creative power and his word of command.

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Having begun with creation the writer continues with the antediluvian (before the flood) believers. Abel brought a more acceptable sacrifice to God than his brother Cain (Genesis 4:3-7). It is not clear why Abel’s sacrifice was superior (thought it involved blood which we later know is a sacrifice that will foreshadow the one great sacrifice of Christ) but, perhaps more importantly, Abel is described as a righteous man (Matthew 23:35; 1 John 3:12). He was commended as one who pleased God so that, although Abel is dead, his faith is still a living voice. The only Old Testament reference to Enoch (Genesis 5:24) is that God ‘took him’, which indicates that he did not die a natural death (see also Luke 3:37, Jude 14). The writer to the Hebrews does not say that Enoch had faith but he was commended as one who pleased God and so, as it is impossible to please God without faith, Enoch must have had faith. It is obvious that anyone who comes to God in faith must believe that God exists but faith is more than simply believing that God exists. Faith is belief in his moral character, believing that he cares. In obedience to God, Noah prepared for events in the future (the great flood) that he had not yet seen. He did this by faith. He acted out of reverence to God’s command and constructed the ‘ark’ to save his family. Righteous conduct (Genesis 6:9) always condemns wickedness. Noah believed what God said and acted on it.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age - and Sarah herself was barren - was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as

good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

After the flood, the next great hero of the faith is Abraham (Genesis 12; Acts 7:2-8; Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; James 2:23), from whom the nation of Israel was descended. Abraham is mentioned frequently in the New Testament and more space is devoted to Abraham in this chapter than to any other character. Abraham's faith is demonstrated in his journey (he did not know where he was going), in his acceptance of the promise of a child (despite the great age of Sarah his wife) and in his willingness to sacrifice this child. Abraham believed God and acted on his faith. When Abraham reached Canaan (the land of the promise), he lived there as a 'foreigner' (Acts 7:5). Isaac and Jacob (Abraham's son and younger grandson) shared the promise made to Abraham but they did not possess the land, instead their descendants went down to Egypt. Abraham was looking forward to an even greater inheritance, the city whose architect and builder is God (heaven). The translation and interpretation of verse 11 is notoriously difficult, partly because of making sense of the original words and their grammar and partly because Sarah, certainly before the birth of Isaac (Genesis 18:9ff.) does not seem to be an example of faith. Humanly speaking, there was no way in which they could become parents at their age but Abraham maintained his hope in God. The grace of God, through the faith of one man (one who as far as fathering children was concerned was as good as dead), gave rise to innumerable descendants. The contrast is plain to see. From one man, a great multitude descended.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

The people the author has spoken about as living by faith continued to do so until they died. They knew that God had promised certain blessings but they did not receive all of them in their lifetime. They showed by their living that they were looking for the ultimate fulfilment of the promises of God. Abraham regarded himself as 'an alien and a stranger' (Genesis 23:4). The Patriarchs were never really permanent residents in Canaan. They understood that their citizenship was in heaven and that, therefore, they were strangers on earth, passing through. They could have gone back (to Mesopotamia or perhaps to 'unbelief') but did not do so. Instead, their longing was for the heavenly country. They were so committed to the promises of God that God was not ashamed of them – instead he is the 'God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6, 15-16, cf. Mark 12:26-27).

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

After a brief digression concerning the faith of the prophets, the writer returns to the life of Abraham and his greatest time of testing, God's demand that Isaac be offered as a sacrifice. This is a test not only of his obedience to God against his love for Isaac but also of his trust that God will still fulfil his promises to make his descendants into a great nation. Although, in the end, Abraham was not required to sacrifice his son, he did everything required of him and held nothing back. Abraham was not disobedient in any way – so that 'in will and purpose' (Gabelein), he did offer his one and only (Gk *monogenes* – 'unique') son. Abraham

was not father only to Isaac but Isaac was the unique child given by the promise of God (Genesis 21:12). Nevertheless, Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac because he reckoned that God could raise the dead – ‘we will worship and then we will come back to you’ (Genesis 22:5). To have Isaac alive was like getting someone back from the dead because he had been given over to God.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.

The Patriarchs had faith that looked beyond death. Isaac blessed his sons in a way that looked to the future (Genesis 27:27-29, 39-40). Interestingly, the sons are named in the order in which Isaac blessed them and not in order of seniority. Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48) again the names are given in order of blessing and not by age. The Patriarchs were sure that God would work his purposes out. Their faith was stronger than death and in some senses overcame it because what they said came to pass. It is difficult to know whether the Hebrew word translated ‘staff’ means ‘staff’ (LXX) or ‘bed’. It is not a problem we can resolve, save to say that Jacob worshipped as he blessed Joseph’s sons. Joseph’s faith looked beyond the grave because his instructions to take his bones to Canaan are evidence of his hope that the people of God would one day return to the land of promise.

By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

The writer now turns to Moses, through whom the law was given and so was the one the Jews greatly honoured. The king’s edict was for every male Hebrew child to be thrown into the Nile (Exodus 1:22). His parents saw that Moses was ‘no ordinary child’ (literally ‘beautiful’ or ‘well-pleasing’), which presumably means they believed that God had a special plan for him. Moses came from a household of faith; his parents trusted God rather than fearing Pharaoh. The writer does not need to add anymore well-known detail (putting of the baby in the ark of bulrushes, Pharaoh’s daughter finding the child and bringing him up in Pharaoh’s house). When he was grown up, Moses ‘refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter’ and so exchanged a place of great prestige and comfort for ill-treatment among the people of God. Moses need not have a particularly immoral life in Pharaoh’s household but it would have been sin for him to disobey God. Moses, therefore, exchanged what was temporary for treasures of greater value. The reference to Christ initially sounds anachronistic but it probably means that when Moses suffered he suffered with the same anointed Lord as the Lord with whom the readers of the letter to the Hebrews identified. Moses left Egypt when he fled to Midian (Exodus 2:11-15) and at the Exodus and it is not immediately clear to which event the writer is referring here. The paradoxical statement, ‘he saw him who is invisible’ could relate to any time during the life of Moses. The institution of the ordinance of the Passover was the last example of Moses’ faith. In particular, the focus of that faith was the sprinkled blood of the Passover lamb.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

After Moses, the writer to the Hebrews continues his narrative by mentioning the Exodus era. The crossing of the Red Sea is attributed to God (Exodus 14:14, 21). Joshua is a puzzling omission but Jericho and the collapse of its walls (Joshua 6:1-21) is mentioned. On the other hand, the inclusion of Rahab the prostitute is, at first sight, equally puzzling, but she did exercise great faith (Joshua 2:1-21).

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated - the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

The writer cannot continue in such great detail and now picks out just a few further examples of faith. The order of the names, 'Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel' is unusual. It is certainly not chronological. They did not always exercise perfect faith but still lived 'through faith'. Such heroes of the faith 'conquered kingdoms' and 'administered justice'. David (1 Samuel 17:34-37) and Daniel (Daniel 6:17-22) were both delivered from lions. The 'fury of the flames' might relate to Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (Daniel 3:23-27), while Elijah escaped from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:2ff.). Various women in the Old Testament received their dead back to life (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37) and this is repeated in the New Testament (Luke 7:11-14; John 11; Acts 9:36-41). Those who refused to be released under torture were probably those who did not deny their faith and so attained a better resurrection (that is will be raised to the life of the age to come rather than simply restored to the life of this age). Others faced mockery, jeering or imprisonment. Stoning was a Jewish form of execution, while others were sawn in two (tradition records that this fate befell Isaiah) or put to death by the sword. Believers were killed by Jews and Gentiles alike and were not always delivered from death. Their lives were characterised by simple dress (2 Kings 1:8) and rough treatment. Despite it all, this despised and ill-treated group of servants of God was of greater real worth than all the rest of humanity put together. The heroes of the faith did not live in palaces or care for their own comfort.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

These heroes of the faith did not receive what had been promised until joined by the believers to whom the letter was originally written. The ultimate blessing was kept until the coming of the Lord Jesus. Salvation is not a solitary thing – it concerns the whole people of God. None of the Old Testament believers is forgotten; neither will any of the believers in this present age be forgotten. Instead we are bound together as the people of God, being made perfect.

STUDY 12: Hebrews 12:1-29: Faith tested

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

After the catalogue of heroes of the faith in Chapter 11, the writer reminds us that these are not simply characters from history. We are all in the same race together and it is not a sprint but a marathon. The word translated cloud (Gk *nephos*) only appears here in the New Testament (*hapax legomenon*). It is not so much a single cloud but the mass of clouds in the sky. Here, it emphasises the great number of the witnesses. The runners are on the home stretch with the crowd urging them on. Perhaps, as in a relay race, those who have already run their course are joining in with the crowd's encouragement. Everything superfluous must be discarded, especially sin that could trip the runner up completely, so that the runner might persevere to the end. A good runner focuses only on the finishing line - that is what we must do, as we fix our eyes upon Jesus. Ultimately all faith is the gift of God through Jesus, who led the heroes of faith from the earliest days. 'For the joy set before him' suggests that Jesus was able to look beyond the cross to the joy of bringing salvation to his people. The believer must also look beyond the immediate problems to eternal salvation. Jesus endured his shameful (and undoubtedly painful) death because he was only focused on his saving work and when he had completed it he returned to his rightful place of highest honour. 'Consider him' is one of the great invitations or commands in the letter, for it rightly focuses our attention on Jesus. Jesus can relate to the reader's experience (opposition from sinful men) but he did not grow weary or lose heart and neither must the reader. The race might be a marathon but this is a call to keep going.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Although the struggle with and against temptation is real enough, here it seems to refer to persecution. The readers might have more persecution (even martyrdom) to come but they must not abandon their faith in Jesus. Jesus had been persecuted and killed and so had many of the heroes in faith in the previous chapter. When believers suffer for their faith, even that experience can teach them something and is, therefore, an encouragement (Proverbs 3:11-12). There might also be times when believers are chastised by God (though no one seems to talk about that kind of thing much these days). When the hand of God's discipline is felt upon a believer, the believer should be grateful. As a parent with a child, God is not indifferent to his children. To know his discipline reassures us of his fatherhood.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

God uses all these things to teach important lessons. In the Roman world, fatherly discipline was universal. There could be only one conclusion of a son who was not disciplined by a father and that was that the son was illegitimate. Such a son would not be a member of the family nor an heir. In one sense such a child is not a son at all. 'Father of (our) spirits' is a difficult expression (cf. Numbers 16:22; 27:16). It might simply mean 'our spiritual Father'. That would then contrast the discipline of earthly fathers with the discipline of the Heavenly Father. The discipline of our fathers was only for a little while and 'as they thought best' (suggesting they made mistakes). God's discipline is without mistakes and is for our good that we might share his characteristic holiness. Discipline or training, however unpleasant or unwelcome at the time, needs to be taken in the right spirit, so that in the end the right result will be achieved.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

'Therefore' remind us that the writer is building on the previous section, which was about God's loving, fatherly discipline. As a race progresses, a runner might get tired with arms (hands) and knees becoming limp (cf. Isaiah 35:3). The readers have to put things right spiritually and get moving again. The quotation is from Proverbs 4:26. Consideration has to be given to those who are struggling so that individuals can know spiritual wholeness and believers can travel on together.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

People are naturally selfish and sometimes quarrelsome or difficult but this is not the way that Christians are meant to be. Christians should endeavour to live at peace with everyone. They should also seek 'holiness' (cf. Matthew 5:8). Holiness (Gk *hagios*) means being set apart to God and from the world (i.e. the world's standards). There are three things in particular that believers must avoid: missing God's grace (2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 5:4); allowing a 'bitter root' to grow (cf. Deuteronomy 29:17); sexual immorality. It is, of course, possible to be a believer but not be receptive to the grace of God working in our lives. The idea with the 'root of bitterness' is that if it is allowed to grow it will eventually produce the fruit of bitterness. Sexual immorality is often associated with idolatry and godlessness which is why the writer to the Hebrews links the two ideas here. Esau was not interested in matters eternal (the inheritance of his blessing) but was absorbed with temporal things (a single meal). His emphasis on his immediate needs led him to sell his rights as firstborn son (Genesis 25:29-34). When, in due course, Esau realised what he had done, he could not undo it. This is not about forgiveness but about things which cannot be undone.

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

The 'mountain that can be touched' (meaning that it was possible rather than permissible to touch it) is Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:11) and the signs are all linked with God's presence, particularly in judgment. When the people heard the voice of God at Mount Sinai they were

terrified and asked not to hear it again (Deuteronomy 5:24-27). Mount Sinai was holy and separate and judgment awaited those who defiled it by touching it. Even Moses, who had an especially close relationship with God (Exodus 33:11) was terrified (cf. Deuteronomy 9:19).

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In contrast with Mount Sinai, the believer has come to Mount Zion, one of the hills on which Jerusalem is built and often used as an alternative name for the city. However, it is clear that the writer is not speaking of the earthly Mount Zion (which could be touched as much as Mount Sinai) but to the heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26). ‘Thousands upon thousands’ (Gk *myriasin* ‘myriad’) of angels are gathered at the heavenly Zion in a great festal assembly. It is unlikely that ‘church of the firstborn’ relates to the angels, rather it appears to be the whole communion of saints (Luke 10:20) who share with Jesus the title of firstborn (Colossians 1:18) because they are heirs and coheirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). Without exception, everyone must stand before God to be judged. The good news for believers is that they are able to stand before God without fear, since Jesus is their heavenly advocate. ‘The spirits of righteous men made perfect’ (cf. 11:40) refers to the whole company of heaven, where ‘New Testament’ believers join the people of faith who looked for Christ’s coming. The new (or recent) covenant involves sprinkled blood (cf. 9:19-22). When Abel was murdered his blood cried out from the ground for vengeance on his killer (Genesis 4:10) but the blood of Jesus speaks ‘a better word’ than that opening the way to God for people.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken - that is, created things - so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

The one who speaks is God, who now speaks in Christ. From the beginning of Hebrews, the contrast has been made between how God spoke in former times and how he speaks through his Son. When Israel turned from God, rejecting what he said and failing to live up to what he commanded, judgment came upon them. Therefore, the readers of this letter to the Hebrews ought to be even more mindful of the judgment of God, as it could fall upon them. When God spoke at Sinai, giving the Law, the earth shook (Exodus 19:18; Judges 5:4-5; Psalms 68:8; 77:18; 114:4, 7) but there was also the anticipation of a further shaking of the earth (Haggai 2:6) and the heavens. Although physical things can be shaken, these are contrasted with those things that really matter. God’s kingdom cannot be shaken.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

Earthly kingdoms might be shaken but the Kingdom of God cannot be shaken. The believer is thankful for the grace of God. Whether that thanksgiving is expressed in service in general or worship in particular, it must be done ‘with reverence and awe’. The greatness of God and the humility of people are rightly stressed. God is not to be trifled with (Deuteronomy 4:24). He is resolutely opposed to all evil.

STUDY 13: Hebrews 13:1-25: Faith working

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. The relationship between faith and works in the New Testament is a subtle one. The previous two chapters have considered faith exemplified and faith tested and now the writer to the Hebrews proceeds with an exploration of faith working. It is because Christ has died for the believer that believers can no longer live for themselves. The outpouring of faith is love for others. ‘Brotherly love’ (Gk *philadelphia*) is the common bond of those who have been saved by Jesus (cf. Rom 12:10; 1Thess 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7). Calvin commented that ‘we can only be Christians if we are brethren’ while Wesley believed that ‘the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion’. However, the writer does not stop at ‘brotherly love’ but extends this to strangers. In New Testament times, inns did not always have a good reputation and were expensive. A visiting preacher would benefit from being welcomed into a Christian home. The Christian must also be concerned about those in prisons – not least because some of these could be their fellow Christians. First century prisoners often relied on the goodwill of visitors for food.

Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

Some ascetics had a low view of marriage. The writer to the Hebrews challenges them to honour it and points to the purity of marital relations. Others debased marriage through adultery and sexual immorality. The writer reminds them that although there is nothing impure in marital relations, immorality will still be judged by God. This is followed by a warning against the love of money. Believers must be content with what they have and remember that God has promised never to leave or forsake them. The source of the first quotation is more difficult for although it is very similar to Joshua 1:5 it is not a direct quotation from the Hebrew, though it could be a quotation from a lost version of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, LXX). Unlike the first quotation, the second is an exact quotation from Psalm 118:6. In short, God’s people need not fear because they can be confident that he is with them and relative to that assurance, material things are of little importance.

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Rather like the end of a more contemporary letter, the final verses of this letter amount to a series of brief references to various matters, starting with Christian leadership. There is much in the New Testament about how leaders should behave and this reminds the believers how to treat them. The word translated ‘leaders’ is not the normal word for ‘elders’ so it is difficult to identify these ‘leaders’ precisely. However, these leaders are clearly preachers or teachers speaking not on their own authority but with God’s authority. Whether they ‘outcome of their faith’ is a holy life or a martyr’s death is unclear but perhaps the believers are simply being exhorted to remember their former leaders, how they lived and how they died. In particular the believer’s are to ‘imitate their faith’. In a sense, these more recent Christian leaders are added to the gallery of heroes of the faith that we met in Chapter 11. All these heroes of faith are trusting in the one eternal Saviour, consistent and changeless.

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

The unchanging nature of the Lord Jesus Christ should cause believers to be very wary of new or strange (Gk *xenias*, foreign) teachings. The contrast between the Christian faith and the ceremonies of the temple are plain enough. The sacrifices of the temple were visible and people could share in the ceremonial meals. Whatever claims might be made for this, the writer says that they are of no value to those who eat them. We should be clear that ‘altar’ does not mean communion table – the force of the passage would be lost. Instead, the contrast is between the passing material things of the temple and the eternal sacrifice of Christ. This ‘altar’ is the cross. Those who worship at the tabernacle have no rights at the altar of the cross because the crucified Saviour means nothing to them.

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Perhaps, in an attempt to make the English translation flow better, the NIV omits a little word ‘for’ at the beginning of these verses but that should not hide the fact that these verses are closely connected with what went before. The writer appears to be referring to the Day of Atonement when sacrifices were offered in the Holy of Holies (Leviticus 16:14-15) but the bodies were burned outside the camp (Leviticus 16:27), a reminder of the situation in the wilderness when that is what happened to the sacrificial bodies, hence the use of the word ‘camp’. The Day of Atonement foreshadowed the atoning work of Jesus and the writer explores the parallels. Whereas earlier the writer had used the title ‘Jesus Christ’, here the simple name ‘Jesus’, drawing attention to the man who suffered, is used. The purpose of his suffering was to make his people holy (Gk *hagiazō*, set aside for God) through his own blood. The sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ was not an animal that he had brought but his own blood (i.e. his own death). John 19:17 implies that Jesus suffered outside of the city, which was the general practice for crucifixion. The point seems to be that Jesus was rejected by the Jewish authorities and this was symbolised by his death outside of Jerusalem. The readers are therefore encouraged to go to Christ who is outside of the camp (i.e. Judaism) and to bear the disgrace he bore (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). The Christian hope is not limited to this material age. There is no enduring city for the believer here (be that Jerusalem or anywhere else) for no earthly city is eternal but only temporary. Rather, the believer is looking for the (heavenly) city that is to come.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Again, the comparison is made between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of priests at the temple. It is through Jesus that acceptable sacrifice is offered to God and this sacrifice is a sacrifice of praise (spiritual sacrifices, Leviticus 7:12-15; Romans 12:1). At the temple there were set times of sacrifices but Christian praise happens continually. The writer refers to an expression ‘the fruit of lips that confess his name’ (Hosea 14:2). After the great sacrifice of the cross, there is no need for the blood sacrifice of animals but only the sacrifice of praise that honours Jesus Christ. Christians do not offer animal sacrifices but do good and share with others and with sacrifices such as these God is pleased.

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Again, the writer to the Hebrews refers to the responsibility of Christian leaders, but this time it seems that he is not speaking of leaders from the past but their present leadership. Keeping watch carries the sense of staying awake in their concern for the souls of their people. The leaders must one day give an account to God for the people under their care. The believers are not to make it hard for their leaders. For believers to have leaders who find their work a burden is ultimately no advantage for the believers

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

The appeal for prayer literally means ‘keep on praying for us’. Perhaps the writer to the Hebrews has several Christian leaders in mind. If the readers have been accusing the writer or Christian leaders of some fault, the reader replies that they have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way. The fellowship of prayer is a good way to break down any barriers in face-to-face relationships. In any event, the writer seeks the prayers of the people so that he can be restored to them. Whether that restoration is from prison, sickness or some other circumstances beyond the writer’s control is impossible to say.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

The writer concludes with this wonderful doxology that includes a number of themes from the letter. ‘Peace’ is not simply the absence of war but the full prosperity of the whole person. Of course, this is only found in God, who is the God of peace. The resurrection is linked with ‘the blood of the eternal covenant’. The death and resurrection of Jesus will never need to be repeated. The Lord Jesus, the one whom God raised from the dead, is the ‘great Shepherd of the sheep’ (Isaiah 63:11). The shepherd cares for the flock but also has authority over it. Therefore, the shepherd will equip the flock with everything good for doing his will and work within them what is pleasing to him. The doxology concludes, ‘for ever and ever. Amen.’ Normally, the ‘amen’ would be spoken by the people and be their response ‘so be it’ (a kind of spiritual ‘Hear! Hear!’) to the words of the leader.

Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter. I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you. Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Grace be with you all.

It seems as if these few words form a postscript to the letter. Despite some of the tough things that have been written, the writer and readers are still brothers. The letter is a ‘word of exhortation’, to challenge and encourage them. Like all preachers, our writer is capable of describing something relatively lengthy as ‘brief’ – it is, in effect, a brief introduction to eternal matters, which could have been dealt with at much greater length. The writer gives them the very latest news that Timothy has been released (probably from prison). The readers, who are clearly not the whole church, are to share greetings with their leaders and all God’s people. Whether the writer is sending from Italy or an Italian community elsewhere is not clear. New Testament letters normally end with a prayer for grace for the recipients and there is no better note on which this letter can end.